

"There are more things in heaven and on earth..."

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I distinctly remember the first work I ever saw by Mark Handforth. It was in 2002 at the Gavin Brown's enterprise stand at one or other of Europe's contemporary art fairs. It was a large mobile made from a few fluorescent lights, some were parallel to the ground, others perpendicular, suspended from one end. Titled *Mobile (Green, Yellow and White)* (2002), the thing was far too big for the gallery's stand, far too high as well, and the bit hanging down would occasionally swing out into the aisle. Incidentally, Gavin Brown, with a mobile phone glued to his ear, was playing around with these hanging neons, twirling them round, bringing them back into the stand area, or idly fiddling with them.

I thought then that there was something special about that sculpture, something that set it apart from the thousands of other artworks hung up all over the art fair. For one thing, there was a strange gracefulness to it, it was both too delicate and too cumbersome—in fact it rather made you think of a giraffe enclosed in a space, the ceiling of which was too low for it. It reminded me of Dan Flavin as it would anybody standing in front of a number of standard neon lights arranged to produce an artwork. Sometimes it would be nice to be able to shake off associations of this kind and just convince yourself that no artist can claim ownership of forms, objects, and how they are used; and at the same time it would be nice to be able gradually to form a judgement about artistic propositions taken in a linear fashion, in terms of chronology. The fact of the matter is that, art history being primarily a history of forms, there is no alternative strategy to linking them chronologically; those that have left their mark on history at a given time just cannot be ignored; quite the contrary, no judgement can be made that is not based on knowledge of them. And it also immediately occurred to me that this indeed was the sum total of what has come down to us of Dan Flavin, this thing having lost its basic rigor of construction, and in the process of deconstruction, turned out so right in a way. In the past, of course, there had been this sculpture by John Armleder, a pile of standard colored neon lights, but its structure obviously referred back (and logically enough somehow) to a very Fluxus use of randomness. Handforth's work, on the other hand, owed its form to what is ultimately a very "conventional" view of sculpture: treatment of form and color where nothing is left to chance, but rather, shall we say, to "culturally assisted intuition." The number of elements involved in his design was cut to the minimum needed to produce a mobile sculpture that was too big; there was no attempt at overloading the initial intention more than necessary—just two large rows of horizontal neons, a smaller one, and a vertical return.

While telling no story, this sculpture had a lot to say (but with elegant simplicity) about a possible future for formalism that would be neither cynical nor nostalgic. It stated the possibility of an artistic approach

that would carry on from where the 1970s left off, informed by all those unplanned things that ended up forming the reality of this art, from the decorative nature of even (especially) the most radical enterprises up to the undeniable fact that Dan Flavin's sculptures are *also* used *sometimes* by certain collectors as a subdued lighting source. There was something absurd about its deliberate way of occupying space and the strategies it called on to stay lightweight. In weightlessness, partly floating in the upper part of the space, it developed like some harmless threat, like a danger that had become ornamental.

The pictures I later got to see of Mark Handforth's work confirmed my first impressions; above and beyond their obvious differences, the works reproduced all oddly referred back to highly identified enterprises of painting, sculpture, and drawing, often involving unexpected allusive strategies. The colored wax, for instance, dripping from dozens of candles set on a scooter (*Vespa*, 2001) marked a pictorial project that places it in the wake of paintings by Morris Louis or Larry Poons, and which the artist has squeezed into the arbitrary constraints of the volume of an urban element. I very soon came to the conclusion that Handforth's work is an eminently urban one, grafting concerns that might be termed "updated formalism" onto the plastic vocabulary of the city (signposts, lampposts, scooters, tires, fluorescent lights, fire hydrants etc.).

A photograph of the solo exhibition at Gavin Brown's enterprise (p. 37) clarifies the strategies in Handforth's works, showing the combination of four reasonably different works—two neon wall compositions (one seems to foreshadow the "suns" he made later on, *Eclipse* and *Rising Sun*, 2003), a geometrical sculpture inspired by Mark Di Suvero, and a large folded city lamppost announcing the now famous *Lamppost* (2003), temporarily installed outdoors in Central Park then brought indoors at various exhibition venues. The whole thing determinedly forms a landscape of urban inspiration within which the viewer seems required to become aware of his small stature, and where the elements seem to have capitalized their graphic dimension through a few basic operations. Folded into an elbow like an idly twisted paper clip, the public lamppost now resembles a line in space. Like this one (and all the other city lampposts used repeatedly in Handforth's work), *Lamppost* still works as a lighting device, just as the scooter covered with incandescent candles is displayed with its lights left on. The "rest of life" of readily identifiable elements puts them halfway between their earlier everyday existence and the status of a "drawing" sometimes "blown up" into three dimensions that they later take on. So they are neither ready-mades nor ready-destroyeds like *Giulietta* (1993, an Alfa Romeo that has been in an accident), or *Mobymatic* (1993, a moped that has been in an accident) by Bertrand Lavier; and their new form has in no way altered their usage. Bearing in mind the distinction Smithson drew between the "site" and the "non-site," one might even call these sculptures "non-objects," compared with the "objects" that they used to be.

The quality of the landscape of urban inspiration of a Mark Handforth exhibition—which may perhaps be traced back to an amazing work from 1999 titled *Untitled (Electric Tree)*, a set of standard neon lights fixed to

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INSTALLATION VIEW,
UCLA Hammer Museum,
Los Angeles, 2002

the branches of a tree already planted outdoors—was pushed to its high point in one of the exhibition rooms he did when I invited him to the Dijon Consortium in 2003. Opposite the setting sun of *Eclipse* (2003), were a fire hydrant covered in paint and a tractor wheel partly remolded in transparent resin—Mark made no secret of his ambition to compose a landscape in which all the elements were round. The twisted road sign in the first exhibition room was specially designed; it discreetly took on the form of a door placed in the background, a sign of formalist ambitions not averse to practising *in situ* art. But even more significant was the selection of works by other artists made by Handforth from the art center collection and arranged in a room adjoining his exhibition. By choosing a set of “misshaped” paintings by Steven Parrino and a “post-Op” Mike Scott painting, and adding a metal sculpture by Cady Noland, he was indeed placing his own approach in the lineage of the formal experimentation of American art of the 1980s.

While many of Handforth’s works still have the immediacy with which Minimal art sculptures are apprehended, they add to this an often figurative dimension, a rather comic strip type of figuration, in their simplification and schematization—like the superb *Fire* (2004), shown in Glasgow (p. 42): a set of red, orange, and yellow neon lights set on the wall in such a way as to look like a fire. There is an obvious logic to mentioning the comic strip element in this work which, above and beyond its Minimal art connection, also seems to be seriously anchored in Pop art. In addition, the enlargement operation involved in the making of *Left* (2004, a crumpled oversized road sign), is a quiet tribute to Oldenburg.

For all that, the large number of stylistic references in Mark Handforth’s work has nothing to do with some exercise in erudition or strategic name-dropping seeking legitimacy for a project lacking in substance by accumulation. It points first and foremost to the desire to situate his output within a logical sequence, the ambition (which many young artists for convenience sake have lost) to carry on the history of art while playing the game—breaking away being one of the rules of that game. Secondly, it turns the actual activity of making art in the 21st century a decidedly optimistic one; the profusion of experiments with form during the second half of the 20th century does not seem to have been for Mark Handforth any sort of handicap to creating something new (with him you will never find the slightest hint of the “it’s all been done before” attitude), but on the contrary the availability of a rich and structured vocabulary that simplifies building them up into “sentences” (the works) and a “text” (the exhibition).

In so doing, his artistic output is a tribute to art’s specific power of statement, drawing from its history his rich vocabulary and syntactic strategies. Mark Handforth’s works speak “from inside art,” without trying to move the place of elocution into the field of sociology, political protest, or whatever, borrowing forms from the history of art and from nowhere else—proof that it can be done. Although filled with objects that have a reality of their own in a social context, there is nothing remotely documentary about his work, nothing of the political critique of our world. It is the construction of a world parallel to our own, of

an alternative to the social and political reality, set firmly in the everyday, but not with any ambition to comment on it. It comes to us first and foremost *as forms* that we can then perhaps identify, environmental concerns for instance, because very clearly the natural elements (fire, the sun, water from fire hydrants, trees) here stand in opposition amid a degree of chaos to the commodities and strategies of capitalist civilization (the neon advertisements, electricity, means of transport and signs etc. have all “been in an accident”). It is only through the repercussions that we are faced with the terrible *organized beauty* of this telescoping, lending Mark Handforth’s exhibition at once the morbid seriousness of the accident, and the casual, artificial sparkle of civilization.